

## News focus

### Evolution writ large

*Darwin*, a major new exhibition on evolution's founder, opened at the American Museum of Natural History last month, and marks a celebration of the Victorian scientist's work amidst a climate of scepticism amongst some sectors of the US. **Nigel Williams** reports.

New York is presently home to a major exhibition celebrating Darwin and evolution that shines above the scepticism pervading the country's fundamental Christians who prefer to believe more biblical accounts of the emergence of organisms.

It is just to counter such beliefs that the American Museum of Natural History has sought to stage the most in-depth ever Darwin exhibition in collaboration with the Museum of Science, Boston; the Field Museum, Chicago; the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto and the Natural History Museum, London. The exhibition will tour the American museums when it closes in New York next spring, before heading finally to the UK in time for the

bicentenary of Darwin's birth in 2009.

The exhibition is remarkable for its mix of Darwin memorabilia, key fossils that were crucial to Darwin's work and live animals that Darwin encountered on his travels that also bolstered his thinking. A live display of orchids also highlights a key role these remarkable plant species made in Darwin's evolutionary ideas.

"Our visitors are invited to retrace Darwin's footsteps, to see what he saw... and to follow his paths to discovery," said Ellen Futter, president of the museum.

The exhibition includes some of Darwin's own papers, samples he collected, his magnifying glass, as well as fossils, two Galapagos tortoises, and a recreation of his

study at Down House in England. In all, the exhibition features the broadest and most complete collection ever assembled of material related to Darwin and his studies.

"*Darwin* offers visitors an engaging and enlightening exploration of the extraordinary life and mind of Charles Darwin whose curiosity, observations, and discoveries nearly 150 years ago forever changed the perception of the origin and nature of our species, as well as the myriad other species on this planet, and launched modern biological science," the organisers say.

Alongside the exhibition, a 40-minute IMAX film follows an expedition to the Galapagos Islands, narrated by the actor Kenneth Branagh. The film aims to highlight the significant contribution that the appreciation and understanding of these



**Grand insight:** A cast of a glyptodont skeleton. It was fossils such as these that Darwin encountered in his travels in South America that helped foment his evolutionary ideas. (Photograph: AMNH.)



**Vision:** Portrait of Darwin as a young man. (Photograph: AMNH.)

extraordinary islands made to the theory of evolution.

The exhibition, three years in planning, appears at a time when evolutionary theory is again the subject of debate. While the exhibition has received strong backing from scientists and many of New York's influential intellectual elite, organisers have had to battle with a broader conservatism.

Last month in Kansas, the state board of education voted to adopt standards for schools that say the theory is flawed. On the other side, voters in Pennsylvania ousted every member of a local school board who supported the inclusion of the concept of intelligent design in the curriculum, replacing them with

members who opposed the mandate.

Opponents of evolution have also latched onto the recent film, *March of the Penguins*, an extraordinary natural history film about the rigors of life for the Antarctic emperor penguins, which has been championed by the Christian right as evidence of intelligent design. The film has proved enormously popular in the US and is set for similar success in Europe this winter. But the French makers claim no higher motive for the film than to show the extraordinary life cycle of these birds and, in Europe, little is expected to be read into the film other than that.

The anti-evolution current in the US was initially a problem for the New York exhibition organisers as corporate sponsors shied away. But the scale and eventual support for such an in-depth celebratory exhibition marks a triumph for the organisers.

Niles Eldridge, the exhibition's curator, confirmed that the exhibition was intended to redress the balance in the battle between scientists and creationist Christians being fought across the country. "This is for the schoolchildren of America," he said. "This is the evidence of evolution."

*Darwin.* American Museum of Natural History, New York, until May 29, 2006.

## Brussels media briefs

A recent European meeting explored the many relationships between science and the public and how new insights may help. **Nigel Williams** reports.

The European Commission cut its teeth the hard way on the issue of presenting science issues in the public arena during Europe's outbreak of mad-cow disease in the mid-1990s. Such was the public's panic and pressure on policymakers that events often appeared to be spinning out of control, whether at national or European level. Even though health authorities implemented safety procedures to the letter, public officials at all levels were generally perceived as catching up with the crisis, reacting to it rather than taking proactive decisions.

At a major meeting last month, the commission looked at the many issues surrounding science and the public in the hope of building bridges for the future.

In his opening speech, European Union research commissioner, Janez Potocnik said: "We need science and technology to solve many of the problems we face today. Clearly research is a critical element, but we must look more closely at the way we communicate research and work to improve its image among the public.

"This has now become more than a priority. Research communication must become more dynamic and engaging."

Paul Baeyaert of the communications firm Weber Shandwick pointed out some of the hard facts of the mad cow disease episode. "You can throw out to the public as many incontrovertible facts and figures as you want, but if they are not framed the right way, you've lost the battle before you've even started."

"In a crisis, it is always — always — the emotions that drown out scientific fact. You can put as many scientists in white



**Life force:** A display of growing orchids highlights the fascination Darwin had with these plants when thinking about evolution. (Photograph: AMNH.)